

Over the years, there has been a great deal of debate and discussion by us, Architects, on the topic of 'Housing'. Yet, after several seminar sessions on the subject, and learned papers being presented by members of the profession, the Architect's role in housing remains as confused as ever before.

The time seems to have arrived to take stock of our role and social obligations as a service profession. Should we continue to 'stay' in Housing, and if so, what is the extent of our involvement as professionals.

*The role of architect in Mass Housing.
The case of Bandaranayakepura
Housing Scheme.*

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ARCHITECT: IN MASS HOUSING

We Architects are quite familiar with the complexities of designing for the individual plot owner, in the wealthy suburb. There is nothing to suggest that the low income individual in the squatter settlement is anything different to his wealthy counterpart. Both seek control over their own life styles, through their built environment and are willing to invest in their property to achieve it. This is the dynamic force which makes neighbourhoods, both low income, and wealthy alive.

The essential difference between mass housing and customised housing, is that, in the latter, the special relationship, between Architect and client guarantees the existence of a well-defined problem. The Architect has to then design something 'specific' and complete. In mass housing design the faceless nature of the individual users mean that, in a sense, design should be incomplete.

The Architect as a professional should be able to deal with and to serve the public at all income levels. The theories expounded by Architects like J. C. Habraken and F. C. Turner, which have been successfully implemented in mass housing, puts the role of the Architect as that of the "Enabler".

They both suggest "support"-based systems to enable the individual dweller to exert his own influence, on the Form of the Build Environment, and its territorial demarcation of his "personal space", in the context of the community. According to Habrovnén,



A view of a street. Some of the upgraded units going up 2 floors.



A typical street with low scale single storey housing units.

the Architect is thus, primarily concerned with the provision of "support systems" which lie outside the control of the dweller, which guide and structure the built environment in which "non-professional powers" or dwellers must operate.

The support systems provide the dweller, with the basic structural, service, and infrastructural systems which determine the form of the Built Environment. This gives the Architect ample scope to carry out his main professional role, the creation, manipulation, and utilisation, of Built Form as an envelope for human behaviour, and territorial expression. The Architect must thus understand Built Form, and be capable of organising it. It should be understood as the means, and the result of human inhabitation. In mass housing the dwelling has to be understood as something that evolves, changes and improves with time. Here, the community grows, as cities grow, as in the past, by a process of addition and piecemeal gradual improvement.

This then seems to be the crisis that we face as professionals in the field of mass housing and in the provision of built environment as a whole. We need to understand the natural evolution of Built Form, as it has evolved through the ages as an additive process changing and evolving to the needs

and pressures of socio-economic forces. One way to do this would be to study the forms and dynamics of an existing human settlement, that has naturally evolved through these socio-economic forces.

One such is the Bandaranayake-pura Housing Scheme, located within the limits of the capital city Sri Jayewardenepura, Kotte. This area was originally marshy land, and was first colonised by 89 low income families in 1959. This nucleus gradually grew reaching a figure of 285 households in 1983, covering an approximately 10 acre area. The obvious attraction for the area being its close proximity to the city where most of the earning members seek employment, especially in the informal section.

In 1983 the scheme was upgraded under the 'million houses' program launched by the government. The upgradation was carried out at two levels. The government promoted the development of infrastructural facilities like access roads, water wells and pipe borne water, electricity, drainage facilities for waste and storm water, and a community centre.

The squatter settlers were given ownership of their plots of land on a 1.5-4 perch basis and they were given loans of Rs. 15,000/- repayable in monthly instalments over a period of 20 years, for upgrading their housing units.

Several aspects of this upgradation scheme, carried out by the National Housing Development Authority, were significant in their success.

- The upgradation was carried out on an aided self-help basis, which meant the upgrading of the units was decided on, and carried out by the owner himself and not the Architects.
- The state undertook the promotion and provision of infrastructure facilities, again with the help and co-operation of the inhabitants.
- An attempt was made by the Architects to adhere to the already existing layout of the Built Form, that had evolved over a period of two decades, through a process of change, and piecemeal addition.

In a sense, the National Housing Development Authority played the role envisaged by Architects like John Habraken, in designing the "supports" necessary for the proper function of the community. The essential difference

being that they were dealing with an existing fabric of Built Form, which they set out to formalise.

When attempting to upgrade and re-organise the existing built environment fabric it is essential to understand the subtle nuances of its expression as a result of the dynamic forces which are generated through community social life. To quote "Built Form is the deployment of materials and space, the organisation of space itself as a vehicle of behaviour, the territorial organisation for self-expression and collective coherence among people. If we do not understand what Built Form is about in this multi-faceted way, what could we contribute that other experts cannot do better?"

This lack of a "multi-faceted" understanding of the subtle dimensions of Built Form, seems to be the reason for the present ambiguity of our role in mass housing. The upgrading of Bandaranayakepura Scheme is a good illustration.

The housing units are predominantly arranged around the system of concentric "Ring Road" pathways which branch, from the main access road through the scheme.

The houses are arranged, two units together, with a common dividing wall, and little alleyways 3 ft. wide along the opposite boundaries of the lot. These little alleys are interesting features of the Built Form, and lead to the rear gardens of the units. They serve to break up the massing of the houses, and provide a pleasing human scale to the Built Form. At present the only

function of these alleys appears to be to provide an independent entry to the rear garden, for each subdivided tenement. One does sense, that they played an important function in the settlement prior to the subdivision and upgrading. If one studies the settlement plan before upgrading, it could be said that these alleyways were part of a complex system of dweller "personal spaces", in the N. J. Habraken: "The General from the Local". The Reader Volume XII spatial sequence which connected the individual dwellings to the spaces for public interaction, like community well, common community open spaces, and playground. In addition to the important access roads, they could have served as "threshold spaces" to the dwellings themselves, and valuable interaction spaces between two adjoining dwellings.

One could even compare them to the little community alleys which are a feature of the traditional housing settlements in islands like Niknos, in Mediterranean Europe, and in the traditional Islamic Housing settlements.

Indeed, when one wanders through the community, one senses a lack of cohesion, where the public interaction



The gaps between the units the scale, and present interesting visuals like the rear garden.



Existing natural features like this Banyan tree have been preserved, and serve as shady congregation spaces.



Certain frontages have been converted to small tea boutiques opening onto the street.

spaces seem to lack these intermediate connectors or arteries. Thus important community spaces like common open areas, the playground and the community centre, seem to be disconnected and isolated from the rest of the community.

This example clearly reflects the need for Architects to look beyond the narrow confines of mere land subdivision into individual plots and look at the more complex broader picture, which could provide new concepts into the design of mass housing. Detailed studies need to be made on the sociological functions of Built Form, that have evolved over a period of time, before we attempt to design the support systems for the formation of new communities, and the upgrading of existing communities.

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The integration of the open space with the building fabric create an impression of a low density scheme.